

Lee Hsien Loong

BY Sherman Hollar |



Lee Hsien Loong, (born February 10, 1952, Singapore), Singaporean politician who was the third prime minister of Singapore (2004–).

Lee was born and raised in Singapore, the son of Lee Kuan Yew, the city-state's first prime minister (1959–90). Lee distinguished himself academically, studying mathematics and graduating with a first-class degree (1974) from the University of Cambridge before earning a master's degree (1980) in public administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. He then became an officer in the Singaporean military, eventually rising to the rank of brigadier general.

Lee's political career began in 1984 when he joined his father's party, the ruling People's Action Party. Later that year he was elected to Parliament and was also appointed minister of state in both the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Defense. In 1985 he chaired the Economic Committee, which recommended a large tax reduction and the implementation of a consumption tax. A year later he was elected to his party's Central Executive Committee, and in 1987 he became minister for trade and industry and second minister of defense. Lee assumed the position of deputy prime minister immediately upon the ascension of his father's successor as prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, in 1990. Lee was treated for lymphoma in the early 1990s. The cancer ultimately went into remission, and he made a vigorous return to political life, serving as chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (1998–2004) and as finance minister (2001–07).

On August 12, 2004, Lee assumed office as prime minister of Singapore, replacing the outgoing Goh. The transition had been planned and occurred without an election. Lee's father was appointed to the newly created cabinet post of "minister mentor," and Goh remained as the senior cabinet member; both men resigned from the cabinet in 2011. In addition, Lee's wife, Ho Ching, served as executive director of the government-run investment firm Temasek Holdings, which owned stakes in some of Singapore's largest companies. The cabinet included for the first time two female ministers of state; it was made up primarily of appointees who had been reassigned from other ministry posts.

While observers expected Lee to retain tight control over the prosperous city-state, he appeared sensitive to the desire among many Singaporeans for a more open society. He promised to permit greater freedoms in a country where rigid social policies and limits on political expression were strictly enforced. Revised guidelines on free speech were announced shortly after Lee was sworn in, but while certain restrictions were eased—licenses for indoor political meetings were no longer required, for example—many remained intact. During his tenure as prime minister, Lee was subject to charges of nepotism and corruption and, as had his father, took a number of his detractors to court for libel. Though he was successful in such legal proceedings, he drew disapprobation over what was perceived internationally as the suppression of free speech.

Lee championed the legalization of gambling in 2005, attracting significant foreign investment in the development of casino facilities. His 2006 economic package disbursed a portion of the large budget surplus as a bonus to citizens and channeled money to health care, education, and housing programs. Even greater attention was paid to those programs after the 2011 parliamentary elections, when opposition candidates made an unexpectedly strong showing. Notable was the creation of a compulsory health care insurance plan, which was to go into effect by the end of 2015.

In 2007 a large salary increase received by Lee and other ministers brought widespread criticism. In response, Lee promised to donate a significant portion of his earnings to charity and to voluntarily subject himself to a salary freeze. Continued criticism of the high salaries, however, prompted the government in 2012 to cut the pay of ministers (including the prime minister) by about one-third and that of Singapore's president by half.

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